

A Vision for Sandy Spring's Rural Character

June 1, 2010

In May 2010, two groups (one of residents and one representing the business community) met to define their visions for how Sandy Spring can retain its rural character over the next twenty years. We define downtown Sandy Spring as Route 108 from Bentley Road (including the museum) to Norwood Road. The map on page 37 of the Master Plan maps this area. The notes below from those meetings represent a consensus statement about how this historic community can retain its small-town charm while accommodating growth. Ideas that generated the most discussion are marked in bold.

At a meeting on June 7, 2010, participants reviewed and approved this document. The Montgomery County Planning Department will take the notes and develop a more detailed concept plan with the participants as proposed in the Approved and Adopted Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan (page 34). The concept plan will be a written and graphic representation of the document and the more detailed ideas to be developed by the participants during a public charrette process. The zoning will not be changed and the Approved and Adopted Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan will be the basis for the final results. The number of people participating in the charrette can be expanded to include more business owners and residents.

Rural Character

All participants agreed that the Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan (approved in 1998) contains an excellent definition of a “rural village.” The following lists are some of the descriptive words and phrases compiled by the two groups as they discussed what they saw as “rural character” in general, and specifically in Sandy Spring.

- A rural village is the center of the community. It ideally employs locals, especially youth, and has business owners who live nearby. It is inviting and safe for children with places to ride bikes and playgrounds.
- **Everyone wants slower traffic and less congestion**, with more details in the transportation section.
- As a way to reduce congestion, create a set of secondary circulation streets on either side of Rt. 108 so that the downtown is not just the part along Rt. 108.
- **Downtown is walkable and pedestrian friendly** with sidewalks on Rt. 108 and pathways that school students use. While the community needs more sidewalks, not every street needs sidewalks.
- People see room for modern and convenient buildings as long as they reflect historic ones, especially on the north side of Rt. 108 which is a good redevelopment site.
- Downtown Sandy Spring could use more density, with about 50 percent more space added in retail, office and upper-floor housing.
- The history is a living history where the roads are named after residents and local landmarks and historic buildings are reused.
- There are a variety of building setbacks, building styles, and paving materials (from asphalt streets to stone paths). However, there is a flow and harmony within the district, with buildings at the entry points to downtown Sandy Spring that “previews” the downtown and complementary architectural styles.
- Structures are generally small scale, especially houses and businesses. There are still horse and produce farms.

- Signs are appropriately scaled and designed for the rural community. The signage from the historic district can serve as a model.
- There is much landscaping, including many trees and planter boxes.
- Downtown has a village square which is a gathering space for community members and surrounded by businesses so that grandparents can bring their grandchildren down for an ice cream cone.

Buildings

In discussing buildings, the groups easily reached consensus on describing what they liked about existing buildings and what elements would make for attractive new buildings constructed in downtown Sandy Spring.

- **Everyone agreed that a few 3-story buildings would enhance the downtown as long as they fit the following:**
 - **Buildings should look like 2-story structures with a big attic as the 3rd floor, as has been done on some modern buildings**
 - **There should be a mix of building widths**
- People wanted to see buildings with interesting features and which do not all match. The new museum was cited as a good model for other new buildings. Buildings should include:
 - Interesting elements such as roof lines, windows, porches and wrought iron
 - A historic feeling
 - Bigger storefront-style windows on the first floor
 - Brick, stone and wood as prominent construction materials
 - High-quality construction
 - Brick pathways around buildings
- There was much agreement on the need for maintenance of existing buildings, some of which may need to be replaced. The historic insurance building, bank, and firehouse were identified as historic buildings which should be maintained, but most people were not very attached to any other buildings.
 - **Redevelopment of the north side of RT 108 was cited as a good place to increase the density, create a village square while also resolving maintenance issues.**
 - Any redevelopment should protect existing businesses.
- **There was much interest in “green” buildings which are encouraged to meet LEED standards and provide sources of “green” power for buildings.**

Relationship between Buildings and Streets

This describes the setback from the street lanes to the front of the buildings, and the setback area is often a major urban design element.

- Historically, some buildings, residential or commercial, had grassy yards in front of them. Newer buildings have parking and some older commercial buildings have turned the yard into sidewalk dining.
- Finding the right balance is an issue that still needs some work and people noted that the entire district should be considered in looking at this issue. Some people did not want to see the same solution for downtown while others did not want the appearance to be too choppy and instead have buildings flow into each other. A mix where some buildings have “yards” and others have parking in front would be a good solution. People did not want to see commercial buildings set back too far from Rt. 108.

- The green space around buildings makes room for trees on all sides of buildings, but these trees should not block the commercial signs so that customers can easily find businesses.
- There should be active storefronts facing Rt. 108 and all side streets
- The setback can define the edges of the neighborhood with the green residential areas turning into greater density in the commercial district.
 - The entry signs which will be installed on July 1, 2010 will help to define the downtown boundaries.
- Have buildings at entry points which “preview” the district.

Public Spaces

People defined public space in a variety of ways, from formal parks to the sidewalks around buildings. This broad definition of public space gives community leaders many ways to help people enjoy their rural village. The idea of a village square was very popular as a gathering place that defines the heart of the community. It was seen as fully integrated into the commercial district and not a separate space. Some details were:

- It could be located somewhere between the new firehouse and north side of Rt. 108.
- It should be proximate to retail so that it attracts people and activity.
- Sandy Spring currently has many examples of interior meeting spaces.
- The village green could include a kiosk for posting notices and a gazebo or bandstand,

Along with a new village green, some people would like to see more playgrounds, especially near the museum.

Sidewalks were defined as important spaces which could be improved in the following ways:

- Better lighting, but not so bright that it blocks the night sky
- Minimal driveway cuts
- Accessibility ramps at all intersections
- Planters and benches throughout the district
- Outside cafes
- Existing sidewalks should be expanded past Norwood.

People want to see much more green space on the north side of Rt. 108. The Bentley Building open space would be a good model for green space on the north side of Rt. 108.

Use the public spaces to show “movies in the parks” during the summer.

Transportation

Everyone agreed with the need to slow down traffic on Rt. 108 and yet accommodate the large numbers of motorists using it, especially in the morning rush hour. Some traffic improvements which could slow down traffic were identified as follows.

- As identified in the Master Plan, create 3 lanes on Rt. 108 (2 for traffic with a turning lane)
- **Create circulation roads behind Rt. 108 to carry more traffic and reduce congestion.**
 - **Pedestrians currently have a difficult time crossing and walking along Rt. 108.**
- Use streetscaping as a way to slow down traffic, with more trees, mail boxes, street lights, planters, and other street furniture to signal that this is not a place to drive fast.
- More visible cross walks would make it easier to cross Rt. 108 with stop signs at cross walks.

- Make crossing safe for school students.
- More traffic signals on Rt. 108 might slow traffic.
- Widening the intersection at Brooke Road and Rt. 108 was an important project.

Everyone agreed with the need to increase parking as long it is visually subtle.

- **Structured parking is not great in the historic areas but could fit in if it could be underground or wrapped inside a building**
- Some people were very excited about parallel parking on 108 while others were a little skeptical that it could work.
- Put more parking in rear of buildings.
- Shared parking at night between restaurants and offices could expand the parking available without adding more parking spaces.

Accommodating a variety of transportation modes was identified as an important issue. “Shared use paths” have a more broad definition than is typical.

- Cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians
- More mass transit would be good, especially for use by students. Ride-on or WMATA busses connecting the Friends House to Glenmont Metro would be an important future expansion of mass transit.
 - Connect with neighborhoods and possibly bring more customers in the future.

Retail, Services, and Restaurants

The most interesting area of discussion between the two groups was the strong interest by residents to see more retail, restaurants and consumer services while business leaders agreed that there is enough demand to support additional shops and restaurants. The growth in neighborhoods surrounding Sandy Spring has created a good market for more upscale businesses and specialty shops. A good sign is that existing businesses are expanding – the Urban Barbeque is doubling in size and the Country Store is under new ownership.

- The biggest opportunity is more restaurants, especially family-owned, small restaurants that featured casual sit-down dining.
- People really wanted a coffee shop – there used to be one here that did very well.
- An ice cream shop was also on the “wish list” but business leaders noted that the bakery already sells ice cream.
- There was much interest in a gourmet grocery store with fresh local produce, but some question if the new Harris Teeter in Olney may compete
 - The neighborhood could possibly attract a Trader Joe’s
- A farm stand or farmers’ market selling produce.
- Other examples of the types of businesses we would like to see include:
 - Bike shop
 - Antique stores – used to be a successful one
 - Arts (start with crafts and work up to arts gallery)
 - Tack shop
 - Tax preparation or accounting office
 - Health services
 - Music store
 - Non-chain pharmacy
- David’s Cigar and Paula’s Boutique would be good types of businesses to recruit

- People wanted to see a better post office with more parking.

In general, new shops should be destination retail and services but not duplicate the ones in Olney and Ashton. Also, if stores and restaurants were open on Sundays (and closed during the week), they could probably increase sales without increasing costs.

Despite a growing group of customers, existing business and building owners need help understanding how the market is changing and how they should change to meet it. Some are rethinking a Sandy Spring location. As rents may increase with redevelopment, business owners will need help increasing sales to match the rising rents. Some specific areas of help are as follows:

- Interpreting the sign ordinance.
- Help with business development and marketing.

The biggest issue is that the current spaces available are not attractive enough to pull in good businesses, especially on the north side of Rt. 108. Community leaders may want to look at structural integrity issues through stronger code enforcement.

Housing

Because much of the discussion was focused on downtown Sandy Spring, there were not many ideas about housing in surrounding neighborhoods, but there was strong interest in more housing in the downtown. Some ideas that came out of this part of the conversation included the following:

- Need for additional senior housing.
- Need for affordable housing.
- Opportunity for more live/work spaces.
- “Green” houses
- **Increase density in commercial district by putting housing on upper floors.**